

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT**

**Coolmine Community School
Coolmine, Dublin 15
Roll number: 913150**

Date of inspection: 15 April 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN
SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coolmine Community School, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation (WSE). It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in senior cycle and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers and examined students' work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and one of the deputy principals.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

SPHE is well provided for on the curriculum in Coolmine Community School and there is good whole-school support for the subject. Each junior-cycle class group is timetabled for SPHE in line with Circular Letter M11/03. In addition, co-ordination of this subject has been allocated to a member of staff as part of the duties attached to a post of responsibility. It was reported that it can be difficult for the co-ordinator to allocate sufficient amount of time to co-ordinate SPHE due to the time required for other duties. It is recommended that the school consider the separation of the co-ordination of SPHE from the schedule of posts and rotating this role among all members of the subject department. This would provide each team member with valuable management experience and ensure that the workload is shared across the team.

Management reports that presentations are made by external agencies such as *Accord* and *Bodywhys* in addition to the classroom activities planned and delivered by the SPHE teachers. Management also confirmed that a high level of information is provided by those agencies to the SPHE teachers in advance of any external inputs. Debriefing sessions with students are conducted informally following external inputs. It is important that a formal written evaluation of all external inputs be undertaken by the students. The outcomes should be recorded, analysed and included in the SPHE plan. As part of this work, it is recommended that the school now examine its procedures and develop a policy on the use of visiting speakers. Reference should be made to Circular 0023/2010 *SPHE and RSE. Best Practice Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools* for support and advice.

At present, a core team of nine teachers is deployed to teach SPHE in the school, all of whom are experienced in teaching the subject. All members of the team are assigned to teach SPHE to more than one class group. It was reported that all teachers were assigned following consultation. As

the subject can often involve dealing with sensitive and emotive issues, this is important so that all teachers are comfortable with the subject matter and have a good understanding of the various pedagogical approaches to facilitate students' learning in SPHE. Teachers are timetabled also to teach another subject to their SPHE class group. This is good practice as this extends the level of contact between students and their teachers. Furthermore, the practice of each teacher bringing a group from first year to third year is also good as it allows for trusting relationships to be developed between students and their teachers, which are central to the implementation of a successful SPHE programme.

Engagement with the SPHE support service to enhance the professional competencies of teachers assigned to the subject is good. Teachers are encouraged and facilitated by management, where possible, to attend professional development activities. An incremental and developmental approach has been taken to teachers' continuing professional development. All of the teachers currently delivering SPHE have attended the *Introductory Training* and most have attended the *Continuation Training* and some the *RSE Training*.

The size and layout of the classrooms were adequate to allow for good student and teacher mobility and interaction. This is necessary to facilitate the active and participatory learning strategies promoted in SPHE. A requisition system is in place for the purchase of resources and materials to support teaching and learning.

The school has some structures in place that support SPHE beyond the planned activities in the classroom. This includes *Rainbows*, a bereavement counselling service which is available for students and *Meitheal*, whereby a group of senior students mentor first-year students. Some of this group also mentor those students with special educational needs. These are very good support structures and indicate the quality of care that the school provides to students. The school might now consider organising a thematic week such as anti-bullying or healthy eating for the school community in order to raise awareness of these and any other relevant issues.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school is supportive of subject planning and opportunities are provided to each subject department to meet once per term. However, the SPHE department has met only once since the start of the current academic year. It was unclear to the inspector whether the programmes of work for each year group had been discussed and agreed in advance by the SPHE department prior to their inclusion in the subject folder. It is strongly recommended that the SPHE department meet and collaborate more regularly. This would greatly assist teachers when planning the programme of work for each year group and should ensure that the needs of students are being met. This would also help to create a more cohesive subject department. Closer links should also be established between the SPHE and guidance departments as part of this planning process particularly when planning the modules which overlap with Guidance. Developing these closer links is strongly recommended.

Planning documentation was made available on the day of the evaluation. The SPHE plan outlines some aspects related to the organisation and delivery of the subject and a framework document outlining the content of work for each year group in the school. There was evidence of the updating of some of the organisational aspects listed since 2008. Further attention is required to this area of review. The list of SPHE teachers included, for example, was out of date. It is

strongly recommended that planning documentation for SPHE be systematically maintained and updated.

The planned programme of work for junior cycle follows very closely the recommended framework in the *SPHE Guidelines for Teachers*. All SPHE teachers follow a common programme and all ten modules are covered with each year group. This coherent approach ensures that students' learning experiences are built upon over the course of the junior cycle. From the lessons observed, it was evident that some teachers follow this scheme strictly. Consistency of approach is good. There was also evidence of the good practice of teachers showing some flexibility in adapting the programme to the circumstances and needs of individual class groups.

The SPHE plan based on the *Guidelines* framework should be developed further to identify the key learning outcomes and skills development required from each module. The resources and teaching and learning strategies should also be included. It is good that there is a spiral and developmental approach being taken to the delivery of the SPHE programme. The school is familiar with the templates developed by the school development planning initiative (SDPI). These could be used as a tool for updating the plan. In addition, the exemplar programme outlines and the templates in the *SPHE Guidelines for Teachers* (pages 7-20) would also be useful. As a further benefit to the planning process teachers should track carefully the material covered in lessons including the strategies and modes of assessments being used. It would be worthwhile to share such practices at subject department meetings.

The school does not have an agreed RSE programme in place in senior cycle. It is strongly recommended that a suitable RSE programme for senior-cycle students be developed and delivered to these students following collaboration with parents, students and the board of management. Reference could now be made to the newly developed TRUST (*Talking Relationships Understanding Sexuality Teaching*) resource for senior cycle when planning the RSE programme.

Most of the key school policies relevant to or supportive of SPHE have been developed. These include the anti-bullying policy and the substance use policy. The relationships and sexuality education (RSE) policy is not being put into practice given the absence of an agreed written RSE programme. It is recommended that this policy be reviewed and progressed to ratification by the board of management as a matter of priority in order to comply with Rule 20 of the *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools* and with Circular Letter 0027/2008. Materials to support this process are available from the SPHE support service website at www.sphe.ie and from the Department of Education and Skills website at www.education.gov.ie

Resources including textbooks and DVDs to support the teaching of SPHE have been acquired and are currently stored in a separate room, where they are accessible to all SPHE teachers. In the lessons observed, it was good to see that teachers are creating or acquiring additional materials to enhance the learning experiences of students. It is important that these materials be appropriately filed and catalogued according to each year group and available to all teachers.

In most lessons, teachers' written plans were not provided to the inspector. However, observation of teaching and learning indicated that the quality of preparation for the lessons observed was good. Much effort had been taken to create appropriate resources for the lessons. These were integrated at appropriate stages. In many cases, lessons contained a very good balance between teacher-led and student-participative strategies.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Eight lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation. All lessons had a clear focus and were well structured. There was some very good practice evident in the sharing of lesson outcomes with students in terms of what they would be learning in the lesson and why. This strategy should form part of all lessons. This would enable learning outcomes to be referred to throughout the lesson, thus consolidating learning and facilitating opportunities for student reflection and self-evaluation. In all lessons observed, deliberate efforts were made to link lesson content to prior learning or to student experiences and this greatly assisted understanding. In some instances, the very good practice of informing students of the subject matter for forthcoming lessons was noted as a further support to continuity. This is a particularly effective strategy in a SPHE context where there is only one timetabled lesson per week.

There was a high standard of teaching and learning in many SPHE lessons observed. The content chosen for each lesson reflected an appropriate balance in students' learning in terms of gaining knowledge, developing skills and fostering attitudes and values. In many lessons, a facilitative approach was taken with a clear emphasis on an experiential approach to promoting students' learning. In this way, lessons progressed in a well-structured, logical manner through a range of appropriate strategies. These included brainstorming, questioning, completion of worksheets, pair work, group work, peer observation and the inclusion of music and poetry. These interactive methods are in keeping with the discursive nature of the subject and help to develop a range of cognitive and social skills. In all cases the activities were well managed, the task assigned was time bound and the attention of all students remained focussed. It is good that teachers allow students to move for particular activities.

During the discussion phases of lessons, effective questioning encouraged students to express their opinions and make sound judgments on issues relating to the topic. Good practice was evident in instances where the development of students' higher-order skills was facilitated by using gentle probing questions that encouraged students to analyse critically the information under discussion. In the lessons observed, good attention was paid to the development of students' literacy skills by clearly explaining the key terminology associated with the topic under discussion. Good support was given to those students who needed it.

Plenary sessions occurred in some lessons where student feedback was summarised effectively on the classroom board. An alternative approach would have been to have involved the students in recording the information on the board. When appropriate, this can provide variety for learners, raise activity levels and improve learning.

Teachers demonstrated sensitivity to students' questions and students, in turn, were generally respectful. A good rapport was evident in all lessons observed. It is apparent that teachers have a good knowledge of their students and adapt methodologies accordingly to suit the needs of individual class groups. However, in one lesson, a very small number of students were poorly behaved and this behaviour went unchallenged by the teacher. It is important that clear expectations of student behaviour be established from the outset and when necessary, reinforced through the class contract.

In all cases, a variety of stimulus materials and resources was well used to support learning and to ensure that students' engagement with the set tasks was focussed and purposeful. Information and communications technology (ICT) was used effectively in all lessons. For instance, in a lesson on grieving the inclusion of a story and music supported students' learning by enabling them to think

concretely about the topic. This lesson was particularly well managed given the sensitivity of the topic and its relevance to many of the students in the class.

In some of the classrooms visited, it was noted that SPHE corners have been developed to enable students to display some of their own work. This good practice promotes a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the creation of a stimulating learning environment. This practice should be adopted by all teachers.

ASSESSMENT

Student progress is assessed on an ongoing basis through oral questioning. This varied between targeting individual students and distributing questions to the entire class. However, the level of completed assignments in student textbooks varied considerably. Currently, there is no agreed policy in place for the assessment of students in SPHE. In order for teachers to measure students' progress effectively, it is essential that the SPHE department devise a policy regarding assessment practice. These could include teachers' observations of students, engagement in pair work and group work, class discussions, questioning, completion of worksheets and responses to tasks. Self-assessment is another possible approach and materials in students' folders and textbooks can act as a basis for this. Further information and advice on assessment in SPHE is available in the *Guidelines for Teachers* (pages 59 to 68) and from the SPHE support service.

Some students store materials in folders which are maintained by the teacher. However, this was not standard practice in the majority of lessons observed. Consequently, the value of the resources being provided by teachers is most likely not being fully realised. It is advised that the good system already in place for some class groups should be adopted by all members of the SPHE department so that these materials are available for all SPHE lessons.

Formal reports are issued to parents at Christmas and summer. Currently, the school does not report to parents on students' progress in SPHE. This omission should be addressed. In doing so, consideration should be given to the criteria being applied prior to the inclusion of SPHE on school reports. It is important that teachers maintain records of students' work. These would also provide very valuable information when reporting on students' progress.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- SPHE is well provided for and supported by school management.
- A core team of experienced teachers has been deployed to teach this subject.
- Opportunities for continuing professional development have been optimised by SPHE teachers.
- The quality of preparation for the lessons observed was very good.
- A wide range of methodologies was deployed in the lessons observed.
- All lessons were well structured and had a clear purpose.
- There was a good rapport evident between students and teachers in the lessons observed.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The SPHE department should meet more regularly and all planning should be undertaken collaboratively. The SPHE plan should be updated and systematically maintained.
- The RSE policy must be reviewed and progressed as a matter of priority and an agreed RSE programme should be developed and delivered to all senior-cycle students.
- The subject department's framework document should be developed further to identify the key learning outcomes and skills development required from each module.
- The school should begin reporting on SPHE in written reports to parents following agreement by the SPHE department on the assessment criteria which will be applied.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and one of the deputy principals, at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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